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Can't Stand to Sit Too Long? There's a Desk for That

By FARHAD MANJOO

It takes courage to stand up at work. I'm not talking about sticking your neck out, speaking truth to power or anything else so dramatic. I mean it literally; it is hard to find a way to work standing up at your desk instead of sitting down.

I know this because I've spent several weeks trying to find the perfect way to work at my computer without a chair. The search was not quixotic; standing up is in vogue. Medical researchers have found that people who stand at work tend to be much healthier than those who sit, and there's a large online subculture of stand-up fanatics who swear that getting rid of your chair will change your life.

But I wasn't just looking for better health; standing, I hoped, would also improve how I work.

Several years ago, I read that the novelist [Philip Roth](#) writes at a computer propped up on a lectern. I've used this technique as an occasional therapy for writer's block. I'll set my laptop on the kitchen counter and hover over it as if I were a conductor before an orchestra. This seems to help. Standing up saps some of my extra restless energy, allowing me to focus better on the task at hand.

The kitchen counter, though, wasn't meant for office work, and after a short while my neck begins to strain from staring down at the screen.

Enter the standing desk. In the last few years, many office supply companies have begun to sell desks that are tall enough to put your computer screen at eye level while you're standing. But I was wary of furniture that required me to stand all the time; these desks seemed to enforce a rigidity that's unseemly outside of a Navy brig.

I needed something more flexible. Then I discovered the adjustable-height desk. These so-called "sit/stand" models are equipped with an electric motor that lets them shift from chair height to person height at the push of a button. Unfortunately, they're regarded as specialty furniture. Sit/stand desks tend to be expensive, hard to find and not very easy to

test in person. That's too bad. I got my hands on an adjustable-height desk a few weeks ago, and I can't stop raving about it.

The model I tried was made by GeekDesk, an online furniture company founded by Donovan McNutt, a computer programmer. An inner-tube accident as a teenager left Mr. McNutt, now 44, with a bad back. Thousands of hours sitting at a desk only compounded the problem. Over the years, Mr. McNutt has tried various ergonomic configurations prescribed by experts — keeping his monitor and chair at just the right height, holding his elbows and knees in certain approved positions — but none solved his problem.

“For me, the thing I kept hearing my body say was much more simple: ‘Move! Change positions once in a while!’ ” he wrote in an e-mail message. “The back pain had me listening.”

Mr. McNutt rigged up a few prototypes and found they confirmed his basic hypothesis. Although standing up all day seemed better for his back than sitting down, the real pleasure was in being able to change positions over the course of the day. A moveable desk lets him do that; whenever his body threatens to stiffen into a single aching pose, he switches to another. On any given day, Mr. McNutt spends about 20 to 40 percent of his time standing up to work.

I tried the smaller of GeekDesk's two basic models — a 45-inch-wide desk that sells for \$749. (The 79-inch model goes for \$799. Shipping to the lower 48 states starts at \$110; the desks ship unassembled.) I'll admit it took a few days to get used to. At first, I couldn't decide when to stand and when to sit. I also tended to forget that I could switch at all; only at the end of the workday would I remember that my desk was moveable.

And although shifting between standing and sitting was effortless — flick a switch one way to go up, the other to go down — deciding on the right height for each position took a bit of practice. The trick, I found, was to adjust the desk so that the top of my computer monitor was in line with the top of my head; this allowed me to look straight ahead at my work whether I was sitting or standing.

After a few days of warming up, I settled into a pleasant sit/stand routine. Because I found it difficult to drink *coffee* or eat breakfast at my desk while standing, I began most mornings seated. I'd begin to stand about an hour later. If I had to write an article, I'd remain standing for most of the day. But if I was planning to spend a lot of time on tasks that required less creative focus — surfing the Web, making phone calls, watching online videos — I'd usually switch back to sitting at around lunch time.

Nichole Stutzman, creative manager for the ergonomic furniture company Anthro, which makes a wide variety of adjustable-height desks, spotted a similar pattern at her office; people tend to stand when they want to get something done.

“We have a lot of designers here, and when they’re trying to draw or do something creative, I start hearing the desks go up,” she said.

I suspect that this is because when you’re standing, you feel a bit unchained from your desk. If I got stuck on a word or sentence as I wrote, I found myself shaking my arms, bouncing on my feet or stepping away from the desk for a bit — things I couldn’t do in a chair. Often, the antsy-ness seemed to relax my mind enough for me to get over my creative hurdle.

There’s one other thing about standing for an extended period of time; I tended to get hungrier than I do when I’m slumped on a chair. That felt like confirmation of the stand-up advocates’ belief that you burn more **calories** when you stand than when you sit. For this reason alone, I’m hoping that sit/stand desks one day hit the mainstream, with mass-market furniture companies making many low-priced versions. We could all do with a bit more standing up.